

South Korea postpones military pact with Japan

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The South Korean government of President Lee Myung-bak faces continuing political turmoil following its last-minute postponement of a military intelligence-sharing agreement with Japan.

The government only told the National Assembly about the General Security of Military Information Agreement on June 28—just a day before the pact was due to be signed. The public had been kept completely in the dark. No mention of the deal was made in government press conferences, even though Seoul and Tokyo came to a provisional agreement in April.

The preparation of a military pact, behind the back of the people, with a former colonial power provoked a public uproar. Japan annexed Korea after the Russo-Japanese War in 1905, and maintained a ruthless colonial occupation over the peninsula until its 1945 defeat in World War II.

This history remains a highly sensitive subject in Korea. Japan's strengthening of its military in recent years, combined with its reassertion of territorial claims over the disputed Dokdo Islands, has prevented closer relations between the two US allies.

Lee's administration claimed that the agreement focused on cooperation against North Korea, but this only heightened popular fears of preparations for a war against the North.

The furore generated by the "secret" military agreement is likely to further undermine the prospects of the ruling New Frontier Party (NFP) in December's presidential election. Lee's presidency was already at a record low of support, above all due to the continuing

fall in living standards for working people. The president's brother, a former government lawmaker, has also been arrested for allegedly taking huge bribes from banks.

In an attempt to distance the party from Lee, senior NFP official Chin Young declared that it was inappropriate "to rush the signing of the agreement, with its details remaining unknown to the public."

The opposition Democratic Unity Party (DUP) labelled Lee a "traitor" to the nation, and sought to inflame anti-Japanese sentiment in the lead-up to December's election. DUP chairman Lee Hae-chan said the government "did not submit a single report to the National Assembly, while entering into an agreement with a country that invaded us."

Some DUP figures accused the Lee administration of bowing to pressure from the United States. Choo Mi-ae, a leading DUP member, declared: "The US must have pushed Seoul to seal the deal during the two-plus-two talks held in Washington from June 13 to 14, as part of the trilateral security cooperation between US, South Korea and Japan."

Amid mounting criticism, Lee postponed signing the deal with Japan, and Prime Minister Kim Hwang-sik apologised for not publicly disclosing the negotiations with Tokyo. Lee removed his chief foreign policy aide Kim Tae-hyo, who played a key role in the talks with Japan. Since Lee took office in 2007, Kim had been regarded as the chief architect of Lee's policy of taking a hard line against North Korea and strongly backing South Korea's alliance with the US.

A US State Department spokesman sought to play down the reversal, telling the Yonhap news agency: “Such agreements would be useful but we recognise that this is a bilateral issue for the ROK [Republic of Korea] and Japan.” Yet there is no doubt that Washington had strongly pushed for the adoption of the pact.

The conservative *Chosun Ilbo* last month cited an unnamed government source saying: “Washington had proposed joint military drills for Korea, the US and Japan for years, and the information-sharing agreement is something the US had been asking for in the same context.” The source added that the moves had “strategic significance” vis-à-vis China’s expanding military strength.

In other words, while the Lee government portrayed the intelligence-sharing deal as being primarily directed against North Korea, China was the real target. The Obama administration’s desire for a military agreement between two of its key Asian allies is part of its wider push to strategically encircle China by strengthening America’s network of alliances and bases throughout the Asia-Pacific region.

Late last month, trilateral naval exercises were conducted in the Yellow Sea, off the southern coast of Korea, involving a US aircraft carrier battle group, three Japanese destroyers and South Korea warships. The two-day naval drills were the first in which South Korea and Japan had openly participated together. In the past, Japan’s participation had been limited to observer status or, as in 2001, kept secret.

The naval exercises sent an unmistakable message to Beijing. In response, Chinese naval admiral Yin Zhuo told the state CCTV network that the three nations had “taken the first steps toward a ‘mini-NATO’ in Northeast Asia with their joint military exercises.”

Washington’s plan for a “trilateral” alliance with Japan and South Korea also sought to counter increasing economic links between China, South Korea and Japan. In May, the three states announced they would begin negotiations on a trilateral free trade

agreement. If completed, the free trade zone would become one of the world’s largest, rivalling the European Union and the North American bloc. Earlier in May, negotiations began on a bilateral free trade agreement between China and South Korea.

As well as whipping up chauvinist sentiment, the DUP’s claims that Lee “sold out” the country by drafting the military pact with Japan reflected concerns among sections of the Korean corporate elite that the intelligence-sharing agreement would increase tensions with China—South Korea’s largest trading partner.

According to the pro-Democrat *Hankyoreh* newspaper, DUP floor leader Park Jie-won expressed concern that such an agreement would further push the countries in the region into opposing camps, with South Korea, Japan and the US in “a southern bloc,” and China, North Korea and Russia forming “a northern bloc.”

The abrupt postponement of Seoul’s intelligence-sharing agreement with Japan, and the divisions within South Korea’s ruling circles over the issue, underscore the sharp tensions being produced throughout the region by the Obama administration’s drive to undercut China’s rising influence in Asia.



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